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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted in Spokane, Washington, to determine motivational factors and preferred conditions that would encourage adults to participate in learning activities. Interviews were conducted with 600 randomly selected households (89 percent success rate) distributed across the age, educational attainment, occupational, and socioeconomic spectrum. It was found that the predominant purpose for participating in some kind of learning activity for adults of all ages was to complete a program they had once started. Second in importance to women of all ages was meeting new people and becoming better informed, while men were interested in learning something to help them on their jobs and learning something to use in their spare time. Variations of the ranking of these motivations were seen among age and sex groups. The study found that the nontraditional method of learning that had been used most by both men and women was supervised independent study, followed in order by video tape cassettes, correspondence courses, audio cassettes, and educational television. The respondents preferred educational television, cable television, and supervised independent study for learning programs. Most adults preferred classes at a college over other locations, and most preferred early weekday evenings for course times, although this varied among age and sex groups. It was concluded that study of such factors is helpful for educators who wish to enroll more adult students in learning programs. (KC)

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DISCOVERING CLUES FOR FACILITATING
RELEVANT ADULT LEARNING

Introduction

During the 1970's there was an increasing interest by educators in adult learning and adult education. Possible reasons include (1) the imminent decline in numbers of potential students age 18-21, (2) increased demands and interests of adults for learning opportunities, (3) requirements of the rapidly increasing job and life complexities wrought by technological and scientific advance, (4) heightened interest associated with the fact that larger proportions of the citizenry have reached higher levels of educational attainment, or (5) combinations of these reasons and possibly others. The changing status of women and the changing population structure were among the influences discussed by Apps as having impact on adult education in the 1980's (1980). As societal trends move toward a learning society, reasons become unimportant, and arguments become moot about the desirability of adult education (education or instruction provided by organized educational institutions) compared to adult learning (self directed learning using resources outside the formal education system).

While the artificial distinctions seem academic, the direction of the trend may be a reflection of both the relevance or anachronism of formal educational organizations having strong implications for future planning. It has been a surprise to some educators to learn that the number of persons engaged in "noncollegiate" postsecondary educational settings is already six times that enrolled in "regular" colleges in degree-credit programs (Harris and Grede, 1977, pp. 30-31). In all

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likelihood, lifelong learning by adults for whatever purpose will combine opportunities for informal learning, self planned learning projects, and formally organized learning situations (Cross, 1978, pp. 1-4).

The Role of Assessments

State level "needs assessment" studies have been conducted in various states based upon concerns of educators and manpower specialists about being more responsive to adult learning needs and interests. Effective planning in particular geographic areas must involve more than using state-wide information and simply asking people what they would like to study. Penetrating comprehensive needs studies tailored to conditions are needed at the local level. The inputs of potential consumers of educational opportunities constitute an important component of a total needs assessment. Based on the author's experience in conducting dozens of such studies over the last 20 years, these inputs need to be considered as only one component in a complete assessment within a local area. Furthermore, such studies should probe more deeply into the motivations (or lack of them) of potential consumers of adult learning and also into conditions under which they would most likely participate in learning activities for adults. Contained in this article are partial findings of a recent local study effort sponsored by seven public and private colleges and universities (including a community college district with two colleges) serving the Spokane Metropolitan Area. The methodology and findings may have relevance elsewhere. Although in-depth probes were made concerning specific types of learning in which adults might be interested, only information relating to selected motivational factors and conditions of learning are reported here.

The Methodological Approach

During the Spring, 1980 a statistical random sample of 150 households (locations) was selected from a recent directory listing all dwelling units in the Spokane Metropolitan area (population approximately 200,000). A grid system such as was employed in a large residential part of Seattle for the same purpose could also have been used (South Seattle Community College, 1980). Using a cluster sample of four households at each location selected consistently according to a predetermined system resulted in a total study population of 600 households at which interviews were planned. After developing and field testing a structured interview guide, a training session was held for interviewers. This session involved discussion of a written guide for how to conduct an interview distributed previously with a copy of the structured interview instrument, role playing, two actual interviews in the community by each team, and a post-mortem session on procedures and process. Teams of two persons each were then dispatched in accordance with geographical assignments. Interview teams were reimbursed for each completed interview. Each team provided its own transportation to assignments made in such a fashion as to minimize travel time and distance. Completed and edited interview instruments were collected promptly by a field coordinator who telephoned every tenth household where an interview had allegedly been conducted as a verification check. Interview contacts were made during the week and on Saturdays during times when men as well as women would most likely be home. Although interviews were conducted at each of the 150 randomized locations, for a combination of reasons, interviews were completed at only 534 (89%) of the 600 anticipated. Respondents were distributed across the age, educational attainment, occupational, and socio-economic spectrum.

Previous Participation in Adult Learning Activities

Nearly four of every ten persons interviewed had participated in a learning program for adults other than one leading to a two or four year college degree; about one-half of these had been engaged in such an activity within the previous two years. In descending order, participation had been by persons who had completed some college, high school graduates, college graduates, and non-high school graduates. Participation in non-degree adult learning activities had been greatest by men and women age 31-40 (23 and 22 percentages, respectively) followed by those age 26-30 (20 percent). Of the persons who had participated in a learning program for adults, over nine of every ten had found the program both useful and interesting. In descending order of frequency, sources of information which led to participation were (1) friend or family, (2) employer or work supervisor, (3) publications, and (5) TV or radio announcements.

Purposes and Interest Patterns for Participation

Clearly, the predominant purpose for participating in some kind of learning activity for adults of all ages was to complete a program that they had once started. Second in importance to the total group of women were purposes of meeting new and interesting people and learning something of general interest in order to become better informed. Men on the other hand were interested in learning something to help them do work better on their present jobs and something to use in their spare time. Importance of purposes for participating in an adult learning activity vary between men and women and within each group by age.

The second largest percentages of men age 18-20 were interested in learning to do work different from that which they were currently doing and in learning something to use in their spare time. The latter purpose was a second purpose also among men age 21-25. Job upgrading and preparation for a different job were second most important purposes for men age 31-40 for participating in an adult learning activity. Men age 41-50 were interested in learning something to use in their leisure time as well as job upgrading. Men age 51-60 were interested also in learning something which would help them do better work on their present job, but of second importance to men over age 50 was the opportunity to learn something of general interest in order to become better informed.

By age category second level purposes for women deviated from the predominant one expressed by the total group. The second most important purpose expressed by women age 18-20 for participating in an adult learning activity was to learn how to better handle the every day problems of living, while women age 21-30 were interested in learning something of general interest to become better informed. Job upgrading was cited by women age 31-40 as being an important second purpose. Women at all age levels over age 40 would participate in an adult learning activity for the purpose of meeting new and interesting people.

Familiarity With and Attraction For Non-Traditional Methods

The non-traditional method of learning which had been used most for learning by both men and women (3 of every 10) was supervised independent study followed in order by video tape cassettes, correspondence courses, audio cassettes, and educational TV (telecourses). Methods of

learning which men and women would like most to use were educational TV, cable TV, and supervised independent study, methods involving a non-threatening atmosphere. Adults in the Spokane area would be least interested in talk-back telephone instruction, radio broadcast study centers, and tutorial study. The latter would be of high interest to only men and women over age 60. Learning through the use of video tape cassettes had been used and liked by men and women under age 50 and one which older persons would like to use. Correspondence course study had been used and liked most by men over age 30 and women over age 40. This method was not a top preference nor one that had been used much by women under age 40, but it did rank as one of the preferences of men age 18-25 as a method they would like to use. Supervised independent study was an adult learning activity in which men age 31-50 and women age 18-60 would most like to use. Thus, methods most attractive for learning seem to vary among adults of different age levels.

Reasons for Non-Participation

The major personal reason cited by men and women for not participating in an adult learning program was lack of time. In order of mention other personal reasons for non-participation by men were interference of work schedules, fatigue from work, and cost. For women the reasons were family responsibilities, cost, and work schedule interference. About two of every ten adults age 41-60 and three of every ten over age 60 indicated they did not feel they could participate successfully in an adult learning program. More men than women expressed this insecurity. Although 10% of the women of all ages cited lack of transportation as a reason for non-participation, this reason was noted most by women age 21-25. Cost was a more important factor for more women than men, especially women

age 18-25 and over age 60. Unavailability of child care was a personal reason for non-participation cited by 30% of the women age 21-30 and by 20% of women age 31-40. Work schedule interference was a major reason cited by men age 18-60 and women age 51-60. The major reasons found for non-participation in a learning activity by adults coincide with those generally found in other studies. However such reasons are also likely respectable deviations from more deep seated reasons found among those segments of the populace who need most to participate in some form of learning activity.

Preferred Conditions for Participation

In terms of postsecondary adult education activities organized by a school, if given a choice of location for attending, adults preferred a college campus over a high school, downtown space, work location, private home, or other place. Mid-week days were most preferred, and no particular day was favored more by women than men; one-fifth had no preference. Early evening after work was the most preferred time of day by both men and women with late evening next preferred. The next preferred time of day, especially by women, was early morning or early afternoon. Next to evening, men preferred late morning. While there was no difference among men as to the preferred time of day according to age, women age 18-20 and over 50 preferred either early or late morning. Although most women age 21-25 would prefer early evening, women age 26-40 would definitely prefer early morning.

To approximately one-half the adults it would not matter whether they attended classes with full-time or other part-time students. However, about 10% would prefer to attend classes in which others attending were also on a part-time basis.

The single most often cited factor which would make a difference in the event the persons interviewed were to participate in some kind of learning activity for adults was whether they received some evidence (a certificate of some kind) upon completion of the activity. Next in importance, especially to women, would be whether some of their friends participated also in the learning activity.

Concluding Comments

This study is one which can and should be among those periodically conducted for the purpose of identifying clues useful for facilitating relevant learning by adults. In addition to having a better notion about adult interests in specific types of learning (not reported here), representatives of educational institutions and community agencies are also now more aware of important and significant other factors related to facilitating relevant adult learning in the Spokane area. They know the variances among age groups and between sexes in terms of purposes for which adults in that area would be interested in participating in some kind of adult learning activity and the types of non-traditional delivery systems which are most attractive. They also know more specifically about some conditions under which it is most likely adults would participate in an adult learning activity.

After having used mailed questionnaires and telephone contacts to elicit similar types of information, the author recommends the systematic interview technique of gathering this type of information as having distinct advantages. An important, albeit subtle purpose, aside from getting information is the opportunity to give information and to stimulate thought.

The facilitation of relevant adult learning requires a multi-faceted approach with a kind of coordinated educational brokering service which has yet to materialize. Is the development of such a service a mission which formally organized educational institutions should adopt? Or, is this mission one which some governmental agency other than those concerned currently with providing education in a best position to accomplish? The imperatives for discovering clues for facilitating relevant adult learning may very well be linked to the answers to these questions.

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